

## **Interlok: Racist diatribe or honest story-telling?**

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BOOK REVIEW It is rare for a Malay novel to get as much attention as is being given to 'Interlok', written by national literary great Abdullah Hussain. However, it is in the spotlight for all the wrong reasons.

'Interlok' is being used as reading material in the Form Five Malay literature syllabus but has come under attack, with detractors describing the novel as racist and sowing the seeds of contempt.

The 426-page book tells the story of the people of Malaya, spanning three generations from the early 1900s up to the time of Independence from Britain in 1957.

The tale is told from three separate perspectives - Malay, Chinese and Indian - before the stories are merged into the final chapter that details the interaction and eventual coming together of the protagonists from the three races.

While the book contains passages that could be deemed controversial, none have earned as much ire as the entries related to Maniam, one of the key Indian characters.

References to the 'pariah class' and the 'caste system' practised in India have drawn intense protests from the Indian Malaysian community.

T Murugiah, the deputy minister in the Prime Minister's Department, and MIC deputy president S Subramaniam have urged the Education Ministry to drop the book from the syllabus.

Among the passages that apparently have struck at Indian sensitivities is the way Abdullah details Maniam's journey from his home in Trichur in Kerala, India, to Penang on a ship.

He writes about how comfortable Maniam felt throughout the journey despite being herded onto the deck with many others "like goats".

An excerpt from that section on page 211 reads: Satu perkara yang membuat mereka senang bergaul adalah kerana mereka tergolong dalam satu kasta Paria. Mereka tidak perlu takut akan mengotori sesiapa kalau bersentuhan.

Translated, this passage means that the passengers were comfortable with one another as they all came from the 'pariah class', and were not afraid of sullyng anyone by touch - a constant worry in dealing with those of higher caste in India during that era.

Abdullah also paints a happy picture of Maniam in not having to deal with caste issues when looking for work. He is even able to pay money directly to merchants when buying goods, instead of having to put the money in a place where a fellow Indian trader of higher caste can first wash the cash before accepting it.

Some in the Indian community have questioned Abdullah's intelligence for crafting a tale based on historical fact and the reality of the caste system practised by society in India at

the time.

### **The wooden leg**

But 'Interlok' must be read in its entirety. Abdullah's critical analysis of the time does not exclude the Malays or Chinese. In some passages, he describes the Malays as 'stupid and lazy' and the Chinese as 'insincere and greedy'.

Despite his sharp criticism of society at that time, Abdullah's writing shows that even with such differences there was still much room for selflessness and kindness, which became the basis for racial unity that is the core message of this book.

The tale of the Malays, Chinese and Indians, while constructed separately and presented like a mosaic, culminates with the three races coming together.

Using one of his Chinese characters, Yew Seng, as a symbolic lynchpin, Abdullah describes on page 418 how the three communities band together to buy a wooden prosthetic leg for Yew Seng who had to have his leg amputated in hospital.

Keputusan terakhir diserahkan kepada Yew Seng, dan dia memilih kaki kayu yang akan diserahkan oleh masyarakat Melayu dan India. Masyarakat Cina di pekan itu ikut sama kemudian.

Itulah kaki kayu yang digunakan oleh Yew Seng sekarang.

(The final decision was left to Yew Seng, and he chose the wooden leg that was to be given by the Malay and Indian communities. The town's Chinese community followed later. That is the wooden leg that Yew Seng uses now.)

But the question is - are 17-year-old students able to discern the main theme of the book or they only see the imperfections and shortcomings of Malaysia's various races?

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